What Braille Means to Me

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2000

World Blind Union

WBU Braille Essay Contest 2000

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Message from Dr. Euclid Herie, President, World Blind Union

Every life tells a story and for those of us who are blind, our stories are told in braille.

I hope the 10 stories that you are about to read, chosen as the winning entries in the World Blind Union's 2000 What Braille Means to Me contest, will inspire you to do what you can to ensure that this brilliant form of communication continues to be taught, used and cherished.

Truly, braille equals equality. When braille leads, literacy follows.

On behalf of the World Blind Union, I thank everyone who took the time to submit an entry to this contest, and we congratulate the 10 winners. All entries were deeply personal and, I'm sure, came from the heart.

I would also thank Norma Toucedo, Chair, and members of the WBU Literacy Committee, and the international panel of judges who were faced with the difficult task of choosing our winners.

I hope you will find these stories thought provoking, meaningful and above all, enjoyable.

Message from Dr. Norma Toucedo, Chair, Standing Committee on Literacy

On behalf of the World Blind Union, the Literacy Committee, and the 300 individuals from around the world who took time to share their passion for braille, I am pleased to present the ten winners of the WBU Essay Contest "What Braille Means To Me".

Every submission was a work of art. The international panel of judges had a most difficult time choosing only ten. I would like to congratulate every one and, in particular, the ten winners whose contribution is herewith printed for your appreciation.

I would also like to thank the members of the Literacy Committee namely: Enzo Tioli, Italy; Yang Jia, China; Isobel Yule, United Kingdom; James Sanders, Canada; Ransinghe Arochchige Sirisena, Sri Lanka; and Mohamed Doukkali, Morocco. I was honoured to chair the international panel of judges who also deserve special mention: James Sanders and Isabel Yule, Members, Committee on Literacy; Mary Anne Epp, President, Canadian Braille Authority, Canada; Denis Regnaud, Executive Director, Francophone Union of the Blind Canada; and Pedro Zurita, Secretary General, World Blind Union, Spain.

The World Blind Union extends special recognition to all those involved in the organization of this ambitious project, particularly The Canadian National Institute for the Blind, The Government of Canada - Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

We hope you will be inspired by these marvelous stories. Braille has a bright future indeed.

Louis Braille and His Six Magic Dots

Almost two centuries ago, Louis Braille revolutionized the lives of people who are blind or visually impaired with his invention of a simple yet sophisticated system of six raised dots. Used in an almost infinite variety of combinations, the six dots can represent letters of the alphabet, musical notations, chemistry symbols, numbers and punctuation.

Braille is to the person who is blind what the printed word is to the individual who is sighted — access to information and contact with the outside world.

Louis Braille was born in the small town of Coupvray, near Paris, France, in 1809. At the age of three, while playing in his father's harness-making workshop, Louis injured his eye on a sharp tool. When his other eye became infected, he lost his sight completely.

At the age of 10, Louis was sent on scholarship to the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris. Frustrated by the cumbersome system of raised letters in use at that time, he adapted a tactile code devised by a French artillery officer, refined and simplified it, and created the system that today bears his name and is used around the world.

Louis went on to become a teacher at the institution where he had spent his youth. Unfortunately, he did not live to see his system widely adopted. Plagued by ill health, he died of tuberculosis in 1852, at the age of 43.

In the twentieth century, his achievements were recognized by his homeland. In 1952, his remains were re-buried in the Pantheon, home of France's national heroes.

What Braille Has Meant to Me

Joaquin Correa
Colombia

I was born in a remote mountain village in Colombia, nearly completely isolated from the civilized world. But despite their humble origins and scant education, my parents were determined to face up to the overwhelming challenges inherent in my congenital blindness which, in such circumstances and in a rural environment, must have seemed insurmountable. My first contact with braille, when I enrolled in a school for the blind at the age of eight, was disappointing. It seemed impossible to me that what I perceived to be "a bunch of bumps on a sheet of paper" would ever make any sense to me. After my first year of school, however, that impression had changed radically. I had learned to read and write and had bought a storybook in braille. My ability to read those stories was like a fantasy come true, not only for me, but for my relatives and their friends, who asked me to read them the stories over and over. From that time on, I often wondered if I would ever become a useful person able to live a decent life like everyone else and came to regard my reading and writing skills as a horizon that suggested that there was an affirmative answer to that question.

I became an avid and fascinated reader, devouring everything I could get my hands on. I didn't draw much of a distinction between texts for adults and texts for children although, naturally, reading stories by the great writers of children's literature was like a dream come true, something that captivated me.

At the time, most braille publications in Latin America used one of two completely different kinds of contracted braille code: Spanish or Argentine. I learned them both so that nothing that I got my hands on would be illegible to me.

The second landmark in my experience with braille came when I learned English braille. I mastered it thanks to one of my schoolteachers, who voluntarily taught English to students willing to spend some of their free time after school learning the language. He taught me contracted braille code in English and that encouraged me to read in English, without paying

much attention to how much I actually understood at first. I'll never forget the self-esteem and satisfaction I felt when I was able to read fluently. My ability to read and write in English not only afforded me access to a wealth of reading materials but fanned the flame burning in me to learn to speak the language.

When I finished my primary education at the school for the blind, I was faced with formidable challenges. Following my English teacher's advice, I decided to enrol in a public middle school. At the time, mainstream education did not exist per se as an educational strategy, nor did the educational authorities accept pupils with disabilities. Braille and typing, which I had also been taught at the school for the blind, were to be my only working tools. I had to develop a considerable ability to take notes, summarize and transcribe texts, and learn mathematical symbols, in short, to make the very most of braille and make up for my educational disadvantages with creativity.

After a very rewarding academic experience, I graduated from middle school and decided to go on with my career training. Now I believe that without the background I had acquired thanks to my ability to make direct and personal contact with texts of all kinds, without my knowledge of spelling and punctuation and, above all, without the skill to elaborate on texts that I'd drafted in braille, I couldn't have succeeded in that stage of my education.

Braille has been essential in my professional life. Not only has my ability to read and write allowed me to mix skillfully and confidently in different work and intellectual environments, but it has helped me express myself in written form and perform any number of tasks, ranging from drafting the minutes, reports, and all other documents associated with serving as secretary of the board, to public speaking and teaching, in which I use braille to outline my lectures, read out full texts, and engage in other intellectual activities.

It has been enormously significant for me to be able, through my texts and intellectual and cultural production, no matter how modest, to reflect my own, as opposed to others', professional personality, to imbue my writings with my own personal touch, to express myself as a thinking being, a participant in society; and if my authorship is recognized, to

know that it's not only because of my capacity to write but for what I have to say.

I can hardly fail to mention the important role that braille has played in the development of my main pastime, music. I learned to read music when I was in my teens and followed a method to learn to play the piano. My greatest satisfaction was to be able to read musical scores and memorize them to play the piano without missing a note. And how could I omit what braille has meant in my everyday life? I use it to jot down telephone numbers and addresses, mark my belongings and other articles, and take messages, write appointments into my calendar, and note important information, all of which provides me a good deal of personal independence.

Braille in Education Today

Educational mainstreaming, which has today largely replaced special schools, has many advantages, but it has also created problems that don't seem to attract as much attention from the managers of services for the blind as they ought to, at least in Colombia. One of the problems is the considerable decline in the quality of braille teaching. In the past, braille was taught by blind individuals who not only used it as their primary reading-writing code, but who were genuine experts because they practised it daily and were in constant contact with publications in braille. Today, braille is taught by mainstream school teachers who don't use it as their primary reading-writing code, who generally don't read publications in braille and who have to cover a great deal of ground to meet all their pupils' educational needs. What that means is a substantial waning of educational services, both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, with the concomitant and notorious effect on the new generations' braille reading and writing skills. Such developments are much regretted by nearly all educators of blind pupils today.

Action must be taken to remedy this situation by designing strategies such as the establishment of distance education programs for both blind pupils and their teachers, to reinforce and supplement educators' tasks.

Standardization of Braille

Given the rapid globalization taking place today, which blind people cannot ignore, thought should be given to the possible standardization of the more general aspects of the braille system, including mathematical

and high technology symbols, at least in the Western world. Such standardization should be based on the English code, as it needs to be built on the sort of strong and influential grounds that the English language can provide; indeed, English is gradually becoming everyone's second language, the world over. Another important concept to keep in mind in this regard is that many blind people have both a penchant and a real talent for learning and using foreign languages.

Conclusion

The reality is that braille is very much alive. It is amazingly flexible, a feature that enabled its inventor to turn a most remarkable feat: he applied his code to express not only verbal language, but musical and scientific notation as well. Braille has adapted wonderfully well to Western languages and even to some oriental languages, as well as to scientific and technological advances.

Technology and braille complement one another. Technology will enable braille to continue to progress and eliminate its drawbacks. Leaders of services for blind people must, then, make every effort to improve braille education, to encourage reading, implement action geared to standardizing and disseminating the code, and support research to innovate and adapt it to the demanding world of technology.

Access to Freedom: What Braille Has Meant to Me

Cara Dunne-Yates
United States

December 1978

"Now, children, who wants to play the innkeeper?" boomed the principal, as copies of the Christmas play were passed out to the eager throng of third, fourth, and fifth-graders. This impromptu play was the surprise grand finale of our school's Christmas program, and no one had known about it. I bit my lip and held back the tears that were threatening to burst forth. As three sleek, printed pages were thrust into my hands, the tears hardened into bitter fury. I wanted to squeeze those printed pages into a ball and hurl them at the principal! Wasn't I one of the top readers, scoring above my peers on tests and academic performance? Wasn't I in all the top reading groups, spelling bee championships, and essay contests? Yet the words on the pages before me left me no choice but to stand mute and non-participating. They meant as much to me as the Japanese characters etched on the backs of Sony radios mean to most Americans. Why had they done this to me? My teachers knew that if I had my assignments ahead of time, I could, and always did, take them to the resource teacher who would translate them into braille. But that took time, and this was a surprise! "I'll tell you the lines so you can raise your hand and be the innkeeper," whispered a little girl beside me. "No, she can be one of the sheep, then she won't have to read any lines," offered another well-meaning child. Yes, I could listen, but I couldn't really participate; couldn't really lose myself in the flow of lines, the rhythm of a script, the musical ebbs and flows of a well-loved story. How could they understand? And then, like magic, a pair of high-heeled shoes came click-clacking down the aisle beside me and a hurried pair of hands slid a sheaf of brailled pages into my lap. "Here is your script. I'm sorry I'm late," said my angelic resource teacher and then hurried off. My heart bounced with joy, and my fingers flew across the pages to locate the character list and the beginning of the script. Once again, I was just one of the kids at a public elementary school who now had the chance to be more than a sheep.

September 1994

So many intervening years and yet the scene felt strikingly familiar. With pounding heart and a lump of nervous anticipation gnawing at my stomach,

I slipped into the first seat I detected as empty. It was the first class, the first day of law school. "Have I made all necessary preparations?" I kept asking myself. I'd written all the letters ahead of time, determined and ordered the taped textbooks, spoken with all the professors, printed out my syllabi in braille and taken notes on the week's first assignment. A hush fell over the assembled students as the professor commenced his introductory comments. He was abruptly interrupted by a pounding on the door. "Is there a Scott Garrett in this room?" boomed an indignant sounding voice. "Ohh." A startled student not far from me gasped. "Y-yes, I'm him." "Scott Garrett? You are served. Here is your summons." A flutter of paper signaled the transaction. For a startled moment, the class must have wondered whether or not this was real. We soon understood it was part of the first day's regimen. "Class, I'll be passing out copies of the summons, a packet of material describing the charges against Mr. Garrett, and some supplementary notes to help you as you investigate the incident," the professor explained. This impromptu session would involve the class reviewing the new material and developing an attorney-client interview.

As a chunk of printed pages slid into my hands, I felt that sinking, frustrated feeling that made me want to bite my lip and squeeze back the same tears that had once plagued the heart of a third-grader in a Christmas play. Different scene but was it not the same scenario? Hadn't I prepared for the semester with due diligence? "I can read it to you quickly," said a woman beside me. Again, the ebb and flow of ideas, facts, and issues would only be partly complete if I had to hold all that information in my mind. Just as it had all those years ago, the frustration melted rapidly into bitter fury. Why hadn't I been warned about this obvious need to get those materials in braille? My first day of law school and I was already going to feel at a disadvantage, watching that comprehension gap stretch between me and my classmates. My medium of communication and information input had been downgraded to a secondary source. "Give this to her," I heard the professor's voice at the far end of the row. Passed from hand to hand, a thick sheaf of brailled pages came sliding down the table to me. My mouth fell open. I'd talked to this very professor last week, and he hadn't handed me a computer diskette to print out containing this unexpected material. Where had it come from? "Well, is it acceptable? I don't know braille, you know. I just went into your computer lab and followed the instructions on using the braille printer. So, is it ok?" He

stood there, waiting for my nod of approval. Still open-mouthed, I nodded, hardly looking at it.

Since fourth grade, I'd been taught to typewrite most of my assignments so my sighted teachers could read them. It was hammered into my young mind that if I wanted something in braille, I would have to plan ahead: ask for printed assignments a week before they were due, then deliver them to the resource teacher or call requests into the National Library Service. It took time and forethought. Now, here was a law school professor – one of those individuals often accused of foisting demi-god status over students – taking up the task of making my world accessible. "Mr. Garrett, on what date did you purchase the boat in question?" I confidently intoned. Once again, I was just another first-year law student participating in a routine classroom exercise.

For such an avid advocate of braille, so voracious a reader of anything I can get my hands on, what a remarkable notion that the beginning of my relationship with braille was paved with bumps. The slow loss of vision during my fourth and fifth years of life caused the reversal of the original plan to teach me to read large print. Yearning to read the printed words that my sighted friends were learning, I decided to pretend that I could see. I memorized nursery rhymes and fairy tales, held printed books in front of my face and recited lines from memory. Many adults were fooled. But there was a problem. I was dying to delve back into the fantasyscape of books and stories, to lose myself in literature. The only way to do that was to let my fingers feed me the images and ideas. Well, if I hid the braille so that no one could see it, then, maybe, just maybe, I would allow myself to read it. I hid books inside my desk and stuck my hands in between the pages, hoping no one would notice, while keeping the printed textbook open on my desk. This was slow and laborious, and I was getting frustrated.

By second grade, the book came out of the desk and lay closed on my lap while I snuck my hand in to read. By third grade, the book was fully opened across my lap, and the shame was gone. For the sighted classmates, the novelty of the way I read had long since worn off, and they asked no more questions. In fact, so vigorously had my love of reading developed since kindergarten, that once, in first grade, I decided that all other school subjects were useless and that I would be happy reading books all day. So one day for about two hours, I crawled into the small

bookshelf that housed the few brailled volumes my public school resource room contained and hid from the teacher and read books.

As the years wore on, the quantity of texts available in braille decreased, and I began to rely on taped books and my friends or my mother as readers. By my first two years of college, often the only braille I ever got to read was that which I reproduced myself, based on notes from taped books or rough drafts and papers, which I then completed via typewriter.

My undergraduate college experiences were filled with amusing anecdotes about how an elite academic environment is ill-equipped and often insensitive to the communication potential of a medium like braille. I was told by a college dean during the fall of my sophomore year, "I've heard that braille was going out of style, so we've ordered your statistics textbook on tape." I asked him whether he'd ever attempted to balance his checkbook by having it read to him and then dictating his responses. Better yet, could he mentally visualize the size and scale of the supply and demand curve, the regression lines and the pie charts upon which my answers to statistics problem sets were to be based.

Once an exam proctor, while reading me a microeconomics exam, confessed that she had no idea what some of the mathematical symbols were. I exhorted her to fetch the registrar for consultation. "Well, I'll just describe the symbols to you, and you can figure out what they are." I patiently explained that printed math symbols mean little to me. "If you've gotten this far in college, I should think you would know what these math symbols are," she fumed, before I lost patience and crashed out of the room to fetch the registrar myself.

My experiences with Japanese were much more rewarding. As the professors knew little or nothing about the Japanese braille system, I invented my own phonetic braille system and copied and memorized my lessons while they were read to me. Later, while living in Japan, I would memorize the 52-character Japanese braille system.

It was during my sophomore year in college that I had my first opportunity to visit a braille library – the Perkins Library in Watertown, Massachusetts. "So this is a braille library?" I gushed in wide-eyed wonder at the room filled with shelves of bulky tactile volumes. Like someone from the tropics

experiencing their first snowfall, there was a choked feeling in my throat as I wandered up one aisle, down the next. At first, all I could do was stroke the massive bindings protruding from the shelves. Flashbacks of wandering the public school library, stroking the shiny jackets of printed books engulfed my mind. I used to pull those shiny-jacketed volumes out just to hold them, feel their weight, and imagine that, one day, they would all magically convert into the bulky-bound volumes that would allow my fingers to guide me into the mystery worlds nestled within their pages. Now, here was the world of magic, knowledge, and information that had eluded me. I tore piles of books off shelves and let them spill around me with avalanche-like furor. I didn't even want to read them. I just wanted to feel their presence.

When the world of technology opened itself up to me in law school, I had two new items of joy and wonder: a braille printer and an electronic braille display. The head-rattling banter of synthetic speech converted miraculously into an interactive channel of direct communication through these two devices. As in that childlike frenzied panic of joy I'd felt at the Perkins Library, I pumped all of my computer diskettes into the computer and printed everything out. As a writer, I'd been producing articles and stories for years. Now, I could read my own writing, feel its metre and rhythm, disagree with or smile at the images that seemed fresh and different now that my mind was taking them up directly through the "eyes" at my fingertips. I printed out everything I could get my hands on, just to "see" its shape. Finally, someone in the technology lab suggested that I was "killing too many trees."

In law school, it is customary for students to spend time together outlining the material from the courses, in preparation for the final examination. Since all of my textbooks were on tape, I spent hours listening to and taking copious notes from these tapes; notes that I then attempted to weave into coherent outlines. Marveling at the conciseness and precision with which everyone else in my study group could concoct their outlines, I spent six months feeling like a sub-performer in this game of strategic one-upmanship. Why were these students all so clever and concise with their outlines? Why did their outlines seem so similar and perfect?

One day, I requested that part of a textbook chapter be scanned for me so that I could print out a case analysis in braille. I was shocked to discover

that within the printed text was the form and structure for the outlines that I'd assumed were prepared from my classmates' own creative initiative. There, within the structure of topic headings, sub-topic titles, and sub-sub-topics were the shapes and structures that had eluded me as I'd laboriously prepared homemade outlines based on voluminous pages of notes. Had it all been that simple? Why, they'd just copied their outline structures out of the book, then fleshed them out with whatever they thought essential. It hit me hard then that the unavailability of most materials in braille denied me not only information, but time, efficiency, and the ability to work on an equal and competitive level.

Statistically speaking, the braille-reading blind population is very small. Many persons prefer other forms of alternative communication. Without braille, I would never know the shapes and colour scheme of a favourite poem, the sharp punctuation of thoughtful analysis within a research paper, or the magical dreamscape of a romance novel. Whether I am leisurely examining the contents of a brailled menu or frantically cramming facts and figures for an exam, braille provides a channel for the whispering flow of ideas.

November 1999

The best moment of my braille reading life came just two weeks ago, however. On our first anniversary, my husband placed a vase of flowers in my arms. Unthinking, I gave him the card to read. "What does it say?" "Read it yourself," responded my sighted husband, who had talked to a blind friend of his and painstakingly copied each key combination as it was dictated to him. The simple words "I love you" seemed so beautiful, filled with his thoughtful realization that the ability to read them myself would mean so much to me and embody the essence of who I aspire to be.

What Braille Means to Me

Katherine Gabry
United States

Braille is a gift – the gift of communication, the gift of opportunity, the gift of education.

Braille is the gift that can remove the prejudice of the sighted.

Braille is the gift of my son living at home.

I'll never forget the day when my local school district's child study team came to observe my son in an early intervention program. Jon was nearly three years old, at which time he would be eligible for preschool services through our local school district. After observing Jon with his teacher at a school for the blind, the psychologist on the team kindly took me aside and suggested we talk about Jon's placement for the next year. He proceeded to tell me that he knew of a nice school for my son – a residential placement out of state. After all, he continued, being deaf and blind – there really wasn't much hope for him.

WHAT??

In the split second after he uttered those words, my mind raced and cried and fought for words. My perfect little son – how **dare** he judge my son as someone there was no hope for!

Jon's teacher came to my rescue. She had been on the floor playing with Jon, but leapt to her feet in a split second.

"ARE YOU CRAZY?!" she snapped at him. "There is no way he belongs out of state, in any kind of residential placement."

I wanted to cry. This was my son they were talking about. Would the school district **make** me send him away? Would the teacher's comments really mean anything? Would I have a say?? The fear of losing him, coupled with the way they talked about him – like he didn't really matter – my eyes began to well with tears. Jon continued to play on the floor, oblivious to the discussion taking place around him.

Deep in my heart, I knew that living at home was the best choice for Jon; there was so much I could teach him! There was so much he had learned already. I knew we could find good teachers for him. His sense of touch was keen, and he used his residual vision extremely well. I made up my mind. There was no way I was sending him out of state. I was confident we'd find a good school for him, one that would give him the opportunity to make it in the hearing and sighted world. I got my way (hooray!), and he enrolled as a "commuting" preschooler at a school for the deaf about 25 miles from our home.

As the years started to go by, we realized that reading was very difficult for Jon. The school for the deaf had a strong emphasis on reading, but Jon was having a difficult time keeping up. He could read if the conditions were right: the print had to be so big, and so dark, and the lines had to be spaced just so, and the background had to be smudge- and spot-free. This certainly wasn't an efficient way of taking in information, and I knew I had to do something to make reading easier for Jon.

The summer before kindergarten, I requested that our state's Commission for the Blind provide braille services for Jon. Being that Jon is considered "partially sighted," there was some question as to whether he could receive braille instruction or not. Typically, partially sighted children are encouraged to use their residual vision to read; only if they were to fall behind and fail would they be offered braille as an alternative medium for reading. To appease my repeated and urgent requests for braille instruction and realizing that the alternative suggestion of tapes wasn't going to work with my profoundly deaf son, the Commission for the Blind decided that my son would be evaluated by four different people, a couple of whom were blind, to determine if braille would be a worthwhile skill for him; all four unanimously agreed that Jon should learn braille.

Yippee!! We were on our way!

Now, five years later, Jon can read print – and I don't want him to give that up – but when we huddle together at night to read a story, it's the braille that his fingers reach for. I sign the story, and he reads along with me.

I can honestly say, from the bottom of my heart, that it hasn't all been a bed of roses. Although I picked up the braille alphabet easily, I still make reversals, and brailling library books, stories, and schoolwork has often been a source of frustration (not to mention the time commitment). The prejudice of ignorance about braille has reared its head in the educational setting, making for a very difficult time for us. Nonetheless, I always knew that teaching Jon braille was the right thing to do, and I will always be thankful that I persevered and introduced him to this important skill at a young age. He will reap the benefits for the rest of his life.

Now, at 10 years old, Jon is starting to communicate – through braille – with the rest of the world. I recently made him a "communication book," with sentences and items in both print and braille. We like to eat in restaurants, so I typed up a list of many of his favourite foods, cut them into individual strips, and added braille to each strip; each strip has a piece of velcro on the back, whereby it attaches onto a "master" page. When we go to a restaurant, Jon can go through his list of brailled items, select the ones he wants to eat, stick them onto another velcroed page, and then present that page to our waitress. How's that for a boost of independence?!

Another way for Jon to use braille has been through the computer. Not only are we working on literacy skills, but Jon is also beginning to explore uses of the computer other than games. To gear up for this adventure, last summer I taught Jon how to type. His keyboard has large print and braille on each key, and through practice, he has become a faster and more accurate typist than his father! The skill has also been applied to use of the TTY, so that Jon can communicate through the phone lines with people who are sighted and/or hearing. His typing skills have also come in handy for e-mailing his grandfather. Granddad sends e-mails to Jon, and we print them out on our braille embosser. Jon is communicating with the hearing and sighted world! And as he becomes more confident in his ability to communicate, I'm sure that even more opportunities will arise for him: educational, employment, and social.

In conclusion, as I think about what braille means to me, I have to smile – a satisfied, comfortable smile, a feeling of pride growing inside me. In part because of my stubbornness about not having my child be locked away in an institution somewhere out of state and in part because of the miracle of the tool called braille, my son is making tremendous strides toward living

and working alongside his sighted and/or hearing peers. I am confident that by being literate, he will be able to compete and perform in the workforce and develop the feelings of accomplishment, success, and self-esteem that so many of us take for granted.

And as for living at home – wellllll – sure, I have hopes that one day Jon will make the choice to leave home and live in a place of his own, that he will be happy and successful and find love and happiness. Isn't that what we all wish for our children? As hard as it will be for me when that day comes, I know it can happen for Jon because he has the gift of communication, the gift of opportunity, and the gift of education – he has the gift of braille. And I have the gift of hope.

What Braille Means to Me

Lynn Jensen
Canada

When I think back over the last three years, braille has had a tremendous impact on my life. Three years ago, I lost my sight suddenly and unexpectedly. I had just graduated from nursing and I was looking forward to a rewarding career in the nursing profession. The last three years have been a long and often frustrating road through rehabilitation. I started learning braille four months after losing my sight. I remember being very excited (and scared) to learn all I could to return to a productive and independent way of life. I remember the first time I was introduced to the braille cell. I thought to myself, "I'm in deep trouble." That weekend, my sister and I sat down and on a recipe card wrote out the entire Grade I braille alphabet. We went through the alphabet repeatedly until I knew the alphabet forwards and backwards. But, this was just the beginning. Learning the alphabet was one thing, but being able to read it was another!

The first sentence I read was "Abe bagged a cabbage." I was so proud of myself. I could read! That one sentence was the start of so much more.

Braille means so much to me, but if I had to summarize it in one word it would be “independence”. The first thing that I did when I learned the braille alphabet was label my collection of cassettes. I then created a phone book in braille. It wasn't long before my rehabilitation teacher introduced me to the brailler. The brailler fascinated me. I would sit down and write letters to my sister that she would decipher. I showed it off to everyone. They were all impressed. Several months later, I thought to myself, "Why stop now?" and I learned Grade II braille. The newest entries in my phone book are in Grade II braille.

After completing the Grade II braille lessons, I began attending the Braille Mentoring Program at The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB). I work one-on-one with my braille mentor, who is a lifelong braille user. At Braille Mentoring I work to build up my speed and accuracy in both reading and writing braille.

Braille is now found all over my house. It is in the kitchen to label my spices and make grocery lists. It is in my bedroom to label my CDs. It is in my computer room to label my disks. And of course, it has played a valuable role in my return to college.

I use braille to summarize my reading assignments, to make flashcards, and to label my classroom materials. At this time, I am not proficient enough in braille to allow for my school texts to be in braille, but I guess that will come with time and a lot of practice. I didn't think that I would ever try to read a book in braille, but the day came last week when I received a braille book about sewing (a hobby I enjoyed very much before losing my sight) from the CNIB Library. I practise reading for 30 minutes every day.

Braille is also evident in my leisure activities. I have a braille version of the board game Scrabble and my sister and I made a braille version of the game Scattergories.

My family has played an important role in encouraging me to learn braille. Both my sisters learned Grade I braille, and one of them is about a third of the way through the Grade II braille contractions. My sisters often leave me notes in braille, and I do the same for them. I fondly remember my first Christmas after losing my sight. My sister had brailled all my Christmas tags.

I volunteer at a local elementary school. I visit classrooms and tell the children about my disability. The kids are always interested in learning how I overcome my disability in everyday activities such as telling the time, reading, and travelling. Of course, my guide dog is a real hit. The children are also fascinated with braille. Last year, I made a braille display on the door of a classroom with the braille alphabet alongside the print alphabet and a few messages to decode. The teacher tells me that it always attracts a crowd during the lunch hour.

I have always encouraged reading. I often give books as gifts to my friends' children. I feel that literacy is very important and I like to encourage children to read. I now braille a message inside the book cover. My friend tells me that her kids run their fingers across the braille. She explains to

them that I cannot see and that I read braille using my fingers. The kids think this is really cool, and they shut their eyes and pretend to do the same.

My friend and I meet once a week so that we can practise using our newly acquired guide dogs. Each week, we meet someplace different and exchange a one-page braille letter. When we return home, we read the letter and then call each other to critique our braille. We even exchanged braille Christmas cards and birthday cards this year. There is nothing like being able to read your own card.

I am now working as a volunteer peer counselor. The subject of braille often comes up with my clients. I always encourage them to learn braille. It will open up so many doors for them as it has done for me.

When I was in elementary school, I remember seeing the braille alphabet at the end of the book, **Helen Keller**. I was fascinated by it and I always wanted to learn braille. Little did I know that braille would someday be such an integral part of my life.

Graphic Rhythm[1]

Juan Ramos Leon
Cuba

A brightly lit stage. Colourful lights everywhere give a touch of unreality, almost mystical, to what is happening on it. The public follows the magic of the scene, and music takes them to the paroxysm provoked by the occasion.

I am possessed by this ritual more than anybody else, and from behind my drums at the centre of the stage I am the one that at the same time enjoys and gives more. My hands strike the drumskins trying to get from them the moan of my ancestors who bequeathed us such rich blood.

Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com
Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com

With practice, the striking becomes a caress that the drums thank with the rhythm that makes everybody dance:

Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com
Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com

But a genetic plot was developing inside me without my realizing it because of the exultation of my song. And suddenly, I cannot see the details. I do not realize the colour certain things are, the laugh and the joy of my public disappear from my sight, in brief, life is lost in front of my eyes.

My drum was dumb and my fingers fell asleep. Joy left me and went to an unknown place. My world did not collapse, it was me who hid from it.

After the crisis that followed the impact and after my acceptance of illness, rehabilitation came. First the cane. It is easy, I thought, and although it was not that easy it was not so very difficult either. Afterwards, mobility, spatial location, daily activities followed, and braille.

Blind Eyes and Blind Fingers
When I was given a paper with braille letters on it for the first time and was asked what I felt, I thought it was a joke. My hands, coarse and rough because of the drums, were a new barrier between rehabilitation and myself. I started to work with the same determination with which I had faced the other techniques, but mistakenly thought that in this way the problem would not be solved.

Dot one means "A," dots one and two mean "B," and so on until the whole alphabet is complete. I do not keep secret that the system is so clever that it impressed me. At the same time it is so logical! It was very easy if you followed the rules word for word, and you could see the results shortly after the learning had begun. But the best was still to come.

The *Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com* Comes Back to Me
In the same rehabilitation centre, a colleague mentioned the special braille music code for the first time. I had not yet started with braille and I told him that we would come back to that question later on. My braille teacher also said something about this, but as she did not play music, she did not give me many details. It is true that she advised me "to hurry up with braille so that I could begin with the braille music code as soon as possible," which was what, in the end, would mean my full rehabilitation.

Indeed, a few weeks later, the musician that had told me about braille and music some time before explained to me the general rules of the system and as his technical explanations became more detailed, to show me how good it was, my mouth started watering.

Four months after I had finished my rehabilitation at the Centre, the Association of the Blind in Cuba organized a seminar (afterwards I learned that it took place every year) to teach braille music code. The echoes of the drums were coming closer and closer to me.

There were two teachers there. Once I was fully immersed in this matter I saw, and I use the word "saw" with full intention and responsibility, because, besides listening to every sound in my mind, I saw them sprouting one by one out of the paper each time I gave shape to a music figure. In this way,

suddenly the letter "D" became the note "C" and also a quaver but if I added dot three in the following cell, it was a quaver with a dot and that for me did not mean anything but Quim. In this way I was slowly shaping my outline and at the end of a line my rhythm was there again:

Quim Quim Pa Quim Pa Com

My face lit up with a musical smile, and my fingers warmed up again, with the warmth I knew so well and that I had not felt for a long time. Stages come back and so do the lights, the public with their clapping hands, the noise and the song of my ancestors in the shape of the rhythm, sweetness and taste that come out of the drumskins for everybody's joy, which is also my own joy.

Very few things in nature and in mankind's wisdom, in my opinion, contain in a simple lesson such depth and great support as braille. Its force and relevance come from its indisputable logic, where one step takes you to the following one, and from its simplicity, because it has incorporated the essence of the alphabet both from a grammatical and a graphic point of view. You must add to this the fact that we can touch words, using our touch in the most appropriate way, which, by the way, becomes our eyes as time passes.

For a musician like myself, for whom music is a career and a job, the braille code for music is our most useful tool to go on developing our activity. In my own case (and I want to explain very shortly here how the braille system changed my life), for health reasons I cannot actually go on working on the stage since blindness in me is an effect and not a cause, but the braille music code has given me the chance to go on developing my work as a composer and musical critic. I also started working a few months ago in the Research and Development Centre of Cuban Music, on a rather ambitious and important project that gives me a lot of pleasure. I can work on my music transcriptions by means of the braille music code, and this makes me independent and quick in my task.

As an individual, the most important project is the braille adaptation of a book to teach Afro-Cuban rhythms for percussion instruments, which I

started when I was a sighted person, and for this I am just waiting to get financial support or interest from the music or educational publishers.

As you can see, the braille system has made me return to my condition before blindness, not just to stay there, but to go on developing my potential and this makes my life more interesting and full of meaning.

[1] *The author has coined a new word in Spanish that is a combination of these two words.*

Freedom!

Marianna Pape
United States

Braille means freedom. Through the years, braille has been the key that opened doors to knowledge, pleasure, and financial success.

My first realization of blindness came as a small girl looking in my dollhouse, thinking the lights had gone out. "The lights broke," I told my father. He removed the tiny light bulbs. Retinoblastoma, cancer of the retina, had stolen both my eyes. Walking around now meant bumping into chairs and tables, knocking out teeth. I could not comprehend why my picture and colouring books now seemed devoid of images.

However, as the saying goes, "For every door that closes, another one opens." I began first grade. Mornings, I attended regular public school classes; afternoons, I went to what was called "a resource room." There I learned to read the dancing dots on a page, forming words into sentences and then into entire books.

Books became my constant companions. I may have been a small, sightless child with no power over anything except a dollhouse, but in my imagination, I soared. My journey commenced with the Alice and Jerry reading series. After that, the possibilities were limitless. I roamed with the dinosaurs; I travelled the Nile to Egypt; I experienced life in a pioneer cabin. I read and reread my favourites: **Wags and Woofie, Freddie the Pig, Mary Poppins, Ferdinand the Bull**. I was never without a bulky braille book and probably would have agreed with Thomas Jefferson's declaration, "I cannot live without books."

The happiest memories I have of childhood revolve around books. At that time, the post office had a separate truck to deliver packages. Afternoons, I would sit on the step between two enormous pine trees, waiting for the postal truck to bring me books to read. In my mind, certain associations still exist. My thoughts go back to a hot summer day sitting in the glider on the lawn reading **The Secret Garden**. I also remember a crisp autumn day when I was perhaps eight or nine sitting on the back steps reading **Runaway Home**, my imagination as wild as the papery, crunchy leaves whirling about me. As a

teenager I remember **Gone with the Wind** and the romances of Betty Cavanagh and Rosmond du Jardin, which I read under the covers far into the night while the house slept.

My teen years brought the tedium of a year spent in the hospital. The x-ray treatments utilized to destroy the tumor in my retina when I was a child had also destroyed bone and tissue. Now that my face had matured, 15 skin grafting operations were performed to repair the damage. During this year, I kept up with my freshman class through a tutor and braille textbooks. The boredom of long hospital days was alleviated with braille books and magazines.

As an English major working toward my B.A., M.A., and M.E., I relied on braille. I took class notes with my slate and stylus. All reports were written in braille first and then copied on the typewriter. I was ecstatic whenever I could obtain books in braille. Listening to books on tape was a slow, monotonous process. I could read faster and knew the art of skimming.

After graduate school I was hired by The Community College of Rhode Island. Incredibly, 30 years have gone by, and I have taught over 100,000 students. I am a professor of English, teaching classes in the short story, composition, creative writing, novels, and introduction to literature.

In the first year of my career, I devised methods that have helped me maintain independence and achieve success. I record students' grades in braille in a notebook. I keep my attendance records on 4x6-inch index cards. I use a card for each student. After each class, I braille the date of the absence on the card. I also have all my lecture notes in braille. I use spiral-bound notebooks purchased at a drugstore. The pages are thinner than regular braille paper, but the dots hold up well and when they begin fading, I simply recopy them.

I have all the books I use for my classes in braille. Those that were not available for purchase, I had transcribed for me. I feel it is essential for me to have the book in class. I can then easily point out passages or make specific reference to paragraphs or sentences. If I could not have the braille text in front of me, how could I do justice to Dickinson, Frost, or Cummings? Since the classics remain constant, I have used and reused these books, each year adding a few new ones. Once again, as in childhood, I still carry around my bulky, beloved braille books.

Since that day so many years ago when at age six I touched my first dots, braille has enabled me to think and live independently. In fact, my day is governed by braille. I wake up to my braille alarm clock; I check the outside temperature by the braille thermometer; I find recipes and meal plans in my braille cookbooks; I prepare meals using my braille timer; I label clothes, cassettes, compact discs, and cleaning products with braille; I make phone calls and write letters referring to my braille address book; I wear a braille watch; on Sundays I use a braille hymn book in church; at night I fall asleep reading braille magazines.

One of my hobbies is writing short stories and poetry. I write all my works out in braille first. Once a month, I host a writers' group where we read our works aloud. Again, braille is a necessity for me at these meetings.

Why do I choose braille above cassettes? On the physical level, I am a creature of comfort. I can read or write braille any time, any place: on buses, on planes, on a park bench, or under the covers on a wintry night. I can also read or write while the TV or radio are playing. Mentally, I remember and retain more if I read it myself. However, one reason supersedes all the rest. Braille liberated my spirit.

Kahlil Gibran wrote the following in **The Prophet**:

> You are not enclosed within your bodies
> nor confined to houses or fields.
>
> That which is you dwells above the mountains
> and roves with the wind.
>
> It is not a thing that crawls into the sun for warmth
> or digs holes in the darkness for safety.
>
> But a thing free, a spirit that envelops the earth
> and moves with the ether.

I am not imprisoned by my body. Lack of vision is merely a physical boundary. My inner being, my true self, is able to soar beyond this limitation. Braille makes blindness bearable. Braille has given me freedom.

What Braille Means to Me

Jennifer Revel
United Kingdom

"1245135 2345135134524124512523451."

Bob Hawkins could hardly contain his excitement as he concentrated on the numbers that flowed steadily from the small receiver in his hand. His companions watched him enviously, thinking that for once, it was an advantage to be blind. What a stroke of genius it had been to send the messages, not in Morse, which anyone might understand, but in braille – a code which was second nature to their blind operator and which needed no secret key that could so easily fall into the wrong hands. As the numbers came to an end, Bob turned to them with a broad grin.

"It's tonight. The message says, 'Go tonight,' " he said ecstatically.

To the eight-year-old girl that was me, Bob Hawkins was a revelation and completely changed my life. Until then, I had thought of braille as being just a mass of unintelligible dots and boring numbers, but now, at a stroke, he had transformed it into something dramatic and exciting and eminently worthwhile. Suddenly, my life took on a new meaning, and I worked hard at the despised **Zoo Way** – the reading book I had been given – and was soon settling into the bustling, hectic life of an English boarding school. Was it only two years ago that I had stood in a Burmese pagoda, watching my diminutive grandmother moving slowly from shrine to shrine, her long, dark hair coiled high on her head encircling the wreaths of jasmine that she loved so much? My initial awe at the many different statues of Buddha surrounding me had soon turned to boredom, and I had tugged impatiently at her skirts.

"Be still and say a prayer to Buddha," she had chided softly; and when I had whined that I knew no prayers, a rare look of irritation had crossed her gentle face.

"Surely," she had said sternly, "you can say, Gentle Jesus, meek and mild".

My fast-failing eyesight had been the reason for leaving my home in Burma, as it was hoped that the specialists in England would be able to help me. However, then, as now, no cure was available for retinitis pigmentosa, so after a year in a school for partially sighted children, I was sent to a school for the blind, and, much to my indignation, **Zoo Way** in Grade I braille was substituted for my print copy of **Peter Pan**, and I was filled with mutinous despair, that is, until the advent of Bob Hawkins.

After the initial agony of being separated from my family, boarding school, I found, was not nearly as terrible as I had supposed, and though I never grew accustomed to saying "Good-bye" to my home at the end of each school holiday, and though, to this day, railway stations for me have always seemed places of infinite sadness, I soon found I was making many friends and soaking up knowledge and new experiences like a dry sponge. Braille was my passport to this new world, and once I had mastered its intricacies, I was reading any - and everything that came to hand, from poetry to music, and recipes to knitting patterns. Regular fluency tests and the honour of being chosen to enter the Reading Competition held by the National Library for the Blind in London each year were all used to encourage a high standard and to provide an aim for learning, and soon I was reading braille much faster than I had ever read print. Listening skills were equally encouraged, and many were the wonderful books read to us in the dormitory each night. Sitting on my bed at the end of the day, I would listen enthralled to the poignant description of life in Africa, as told by Paul White in **The Jungle Doctor**. As the final words of the book, "This is Africa." fell quietly in the hushed room, I knew, without a doubt, that one day I, too, would go to Africa and meet some of the people I had heard about. But this would not take place for another 15 years.

Besides reading, I found that I also enjoyed writing and jotting down ideas and making up stories and poems. Soon, the problem of what to give my sister for a birthday or Christmas present was solved, as I would write her a poem or a story. She probably dreaded these offerings, but to me they provided an endless source of pleasure. Since English meant so much to me, it was only natural that I should choose to read it at university; and some of my most vivid memories are of laughing groups of students helping me to pack my braille volumes into canvas bags at the end of each academic year,

and sticking the penny stamps onto each pre-addressed label. Beowulf and Catullus, Plato and Robert Burns all jockeyed for position on the pavement outside while the stacks of books grew higher and higher, waiting for the post van to collect them.

And so the years flew by, and before I realized it, I had graduated, and it was time for me to look for a career. Walking back from College one day, I happened to pass a hoarding advertising Voluntary Service Overseas, and on a sudden whim, I stepped inside the office and found I was agreeing to teach braille to blind girls in primary school in Tanzania. High in the Usambara mountains, teaching children who had come from as far afield as the Congo border, a thousand miles away, I remembered **The Jungle Doctor**, heard so long ago, and my conviction that one day I, too, would come to Africa; and I also thought of the founder of braille, that great man, Louis Braille, and I wondered whether he could ever have envisaged that his scheme of reading and writing would one day be translated into Swahili and give such hope to a small child in the mountains of East Africa. The children I taught were so eager to learn that they were a constant delight; but since they were so hedged around by superstition and taboo, it was necessary to spend most weekends touring round the towns and villages demonstrating reading and writing braille, talking to people and playing recordings of the children singing and laughing in an attempt to encourage parents to send their blind children to our school. The lack of literature in Swahili braille meant that many books had to be written out by hand, and all this helped bring us closer together as a group and sped up my learning of the language. Throughout my stay, regular consignments of books would arrive for me each month from the National Library in England, my link with home, keeping me in touch with my own language and with my own country.

On my return to England, I trained as a medical social worker and for the next seven years I worked on various wards in different hospitals, my pocket braille frame becoming a familiar sight as I carried it with me everywhere, jotting down ward notes and the outcome of interviews and discharge plans before converting them into proper reports, which I would type out for the medical notes. In the meantime, I had married a radiographer, who had also been a volunteer in Tanzania, and when our first child was born, I gave up work altogether in order to concentrate on our home.

Here, as in the workplace, braille played an important part in my life, and during the years of bringing up our three children, I found I was constantly devising new ways of using it. Self-adhesive plastic-backed braille labels were used generously on plants and shrubs in the garden, on herb and spice containers in the kitchen and on boxes and bottles in the medicine cupboard. Our children, being fully sighted, had no need of braille for their personal use, but I had need of it in order to teach them how to read and to help them with their studies. Here, the "Two-Way" books provided by the National Library were invaluable, as, with the braille and printed texts lying side by side beneath the pictures, both the children and I were able to enjoy the books together. Handwriting, of course, had to be left to my husband and to their teachers, but the Fisher Price "play desk" complete with its solid plastic letters with magnetic backs was a great help in showing them their letters, as were the thick cards with sandpaper letters and numbers used by the Montessori schools.

Now that I was always at home, I experimented with different kinds of cooking, and besides the fun of making gingerbread men and play dough with the children, I found I really enjoyed baking and trying out new dishes; and I started a rare collection of recipe books, and filled our freezer and larder with homemade meals and cakes, labeling everything in braille. Jam-making became part of our lives, and the whole family was annually involved in picking soft fruits on the local farms in the summer and gathering fruit from our trees in the autumn so that they could be turned into chutneys and preserves. These more than covered our needs and served as useful gifts for charity stalls, harvest festivals, and presents for teachers.

Now that my children are older, I have returned to social work on a part-time basis and still use my hand-frame for notes, though, as I become more computer literate, I have no doubt that the computer and electronic note-takers will eventually take over. More recently, I have been asked to teach braille to adult students in a further education college, and this has given me great pleasure.

"I find braille so confusing as after a while all the dots seem to run together and become one mass", lamented one of my students, despairingly, the other day. "And all those numbers; I can't seem to get them straight in my head."

Her words triggered off a memory half forgotten in my mind, and I smiled as I thought that the wheel had surely come full circle.

"Today," I said, "we will do something different. We will talk about the breaking of codes."

"Codes?" said my student, and a ripple of interest ran round the class.

"Yes, codes," I said. "But first, I shall tell you about Bob Hawkins, an eminent code-breaker. His story goes something like this. . . ."

What Braille Means to Me

Dr. Rajinder Singh Sethi
India

I can read – about people – their feelings, their aspirations, their achievements, and their failures; about nature and its mystical powers; about technology and how it's changing the way we live. I can also write and share my thoughts and feelings with everyone and contribute in my own humble way to the cause of better living for the human beings of this world. Well, you may be wondering – what is so great about this ? A 55- year old man is expected to do this.

There is a difference though – I was born blind and now I am profoundly deaf also. I can do all this and more because of the invention of the script of the great Louis Braille, i.e., braille. Braille has given me the strength to struggle and carve out a space for myself in this world. Words cannot express adequately what braille means to me.

These tiny six dots are an integral part of my very existence.

I had learned braille in the initial years of my life. Soon after, I was admitted to a normal school. My family members were overjoyed and kind of surprised to see me keeping pace with the normal children with the aid of these six tiny dots. The thought that I could be a source of joy to my family members was great. I felt exhilarated. Braille had shown me the way from where there was no looking back.

At school I had to work harder than my sighted counterparts. I had to take the help of transcribers and writers. But I was listening to my teachers, taking notes, raising doubts, and cramming for my examinations just like my sighted counterparts. Braille provided me with a platform of equality and helped me to explore my talents. It gave a chance to fight, and I decided to make the most of it – and that, I did.

I was in college when my hearing started deteriorating very fast. It was becoming increasingly difficult for me to cope with my studies. I had to use a hearing aid. It was very difficult for me to come to terms with this new

handicap and at times it seemed very unfair too. That was a phase of utter depression for me, my dreams of becoming a professor in history were falling apart. But once again, braille rescued me from this quagmire of depression, and I proceeded to complete my M.A. in history – an accomplishment that would never have been possible without braille.

My dependence on braille is total. After my Masters in History, I went on to do my Ph.D. I was awarded my doctorate and with this success came lots of name and fame. I became more than just a face in the crowd with accolades flowing in from all quarters. I took part in the All India Braille Reading Competition and came out a winner. I took part in a car rally for the blind as a navigator also. I got a lot of publicity – my photograph appeared in national dailies, and I was featured on television also. I went to various countries like the U.S., the U.K., Sweden, Italy, Bahrain, etc., to attend conferences and give talks on blind welfare where I delivered the speech from prepared text in braille. In my heart I was thanking the inventor of braille – Louis Braille.

Braille showered me with self pride and added meaning to my existence. It made me bold. At one point in my life, I even sought to become financially independent – a move I would never have made had it not been for these six tiny dots.

Braille stood by me when I needed it the most. My hearing problem had worsened with age. The little pleasures of life that I had, like chatting over the phone and listening to Hindi films and classical music were becoming increasingly difficult for me to enjoy. Whenever there was a party or a family get-together at my place, I could never be a part of it. Socializing was reduced to a bare minimum. The curse of loneliness would have become very difficult for me to bear had it not been for braille. Braille had become my sole companion and my best friend. By moving my fingers over these six tiny dots, I used to pass my time reading magazines and journals. I was also contributing to many journals, which, along with satisfaction, gave me honorary payments.

Teaching braille and unfolding the power of this great invention has given me immense pleasure. I have taught braille to many volunteers, both blind and sighted. One lady became so motivated that after learning braille, she went on to transcribe many books.

Though I don't socialize much, braille has helped me keep in touch with the few friends I have. I get lots of magazines in braille from abroad like **Reader's Digest** (their stories of hope, faith, and endurance provide me with a lot of confidence and inspiration); **Dialogue, Metilda, Playboy** (of course, minus the pictures), etc. I love to share them with people and in the process have made new friends. As I am writing this, another box containing **Reader's Digest** for the month of October (I get them by sea route) has arrived. I simply can't wait to open it.

Asking what braille means to me is akin to asking what fuel means to an automobile, what the binary digits mean to a computer, what water means to a fish, and what freedom means to a Nelson Mandela who was incarcerated for the better part of his life. It means freedom to me. It is platform of equality for me – equality with my sighted counterparts. It means oxygen for me. It is my life blood – my life support system. It makes no demands; it doesn't require electricity. I can read in a dark room as easily as in a crowded train. My thirst for information and sharing it with others would have remained unfulfilled had it not been for braille.

Modern technology has given various gadgets that seek to help the visually handicapped like tapes and speech synthesizers. But nothing can give me the kind of freedom that braille has given me. As Ms. Agnes rightly points out "Modern technology is fast, functional, and advantageous. With tapes and speech synthesizers, a blind person can collect lots of information, but listening is not the same as reading, and talking is not the same as writing."

I thank you, Louis Braille, once again for providing me with these six tiny dots. They have changed my life. Besides providing me with education and experience, they have provided me with freedom and independence of the highest order.

The Key to Freedom

Ana Maria Silva
Sweden

The idea of learning braille was not disheartening for me. It turned out to be liberating instead, maybe because, from my early childhood, I had listened to comments about the future development of my disorder.

At five, an ophthalmologist said, in my presence, that I should not be sent to school since I would not be able to accomplish the usual tasks, and this would be a source of endless frustrations for me. They should not contradict my wishes either, as my fate was so dark. In short, nothing could be expected from me, because sooner or later I would become blind.

In spite of this discouraging prognosis, my parents decided that I should enter our district school. The following years were difficult ones, because my vision was noticeably getting worse. My memory and my will were my allies. I discovered how to make the most of every chance to learn and to express myself in the best possible way so that people considered me intelligent. But this was neither enough to reach fully satisfactory results nor to be accepted by my classmates. At nine, I started to attend a school for low-vision children. The prediction of the ophthalmologist was relentlessly becoming true, but at that time nobody doubted that somehow or other, I should have access to education.

By the end of 1958, my situation became untenable – I was finishing my primary education and I could not even read the newspaper headlines. Other boys and girls in my surroundings were getting ready to begin their secondary education; they selected their new schools and felt they were on their way to becoming adults. There did not seem to be any alternative for me. It was then that someone made a suggestion that was going to produce a total change in my life and to settle the basis of my future: To Learn Braille.

It was like finding the key to a treasure, like opening the door to freedom or beginning a lengthy and thoroughly satisfactory relationship. Under my fingers, the world started to get a new dimension and in spite of the fact that my sight was gradually disappearing, a new feeling of fullness began to grow

deep down myself. The universe was coming within the reach of my hands. Blindness was no longer a sentence of isolation and ignorance. I would not be doomed to being totally dependent; if other blind people studied, worked, had a family, I would also be able to do the same in due time.

Learning a new way of reading allowed me to start my secondary studies. In my spare time, I began reading youth novels and later on I tried more difficult and complex works. What had just been a hope, in those days appeared like something real.

Like many other young girls, I started writing my private journal. In its pages I recorded the typical conflicts and dreams of an adolescence that the onset of blindness made more complex.

From those days, the braille system was always at hand as an irreplaceable tool for finding new areas of interest – advocacy work, learning languages, exchange of correspondence with other blind persons – and for enlarging my knowledge by reading school subjects and fiction.

My first job, by means of which I earned some money, was in an organization of blind persons in a suburb of Buenos Aires. My task was to teach students who had to sit for an examination at a special school in order to avoid the residential system.

Later on, other experiences and other challenges arose – university studies, a job in a library for the blind, getting married, buying a house. When the time came for carrying out the most important task of my life, braille was present – I took the notes for the future parents course with my slate and stylus.

When the "dirty war" cast a shadow on the sky of my country, Argentina, leaving behind wounds that will take very long to heal, the man who I thought I would share my life with forever, had to leave us without delay. The letters we exchanged were of course written in braille because he is also blind. After 28 months, we finally met again in a country so very different from ours.

In Sweden, first of all, I entered an establishment for blind adults where I got through a lengthy rehabilitation process. At the same time, I went to a school for immigrants. They gave me books to learn the new language. The teachers in both centres co-operated to make the task easier for me in a joint effort, which I was only able to evaluate afterwards. It was an intense period during which circumstances demanded a considerable amount of adaptation from me.

My marriage did not stand the test of exile. Friends and relatives were very far away; my son and I were alone and surrounded by strangers who tried to help us without knowing us well.

Braille publications arrived periodically from the Spanish-language printing houses – adult magazines that during all these years have kept me informed of what was happening in the region I come from; children's magazines by means of which I was able to help my son keep our language alive.

When I managed the language of my new country in an acceptable way, I joined the organization of the blind as an active member. I had the chance to take part in courses and lectures. It was a great satisfaction for me to participate in a committee on the promotion of the braille system.

In 1993, I had my first contact with computerized braille. This was the starting point of an enormously productive period since my communication with sighted people became much simpler. To print a text which I have already checked, makes me feel more confident than I have ever felt up to now.

Braille goes on providing me with the means to allow my integration in the community and my participation and influence in things that are relevant to me. Nowadays, embossed writing is present in every aspect of my life – in my work in a talking newspaper, in the stories I read aloud for my granddaughter, in my literary attempts, in the notes I take in order not to forget anything when I inform the public about how life without sight is, in the containers and boxes of food and cosmetics for which I myself write the labels, in the summary of my bank account that I receive monthly, in the

cooking recipes I collect, in the medicines that the people at the chemist's can identify by this means at my request. My CDs are labelled with transparent tape with braille writing on it. And every four years, when it's time to vote, I get an envelope with the lists of the political parties. Each one of them is in a smaller envelope labelled in braille at the front. This allows me to take part in elections just as everybody else, and I can keep my vote secret.

In my spare time, I practise origami. In order to use colours, I have written small labels with the corresponding names; in this way I can make use of visual effects to express myself.

Spanish braille publications keep on arriving from Spain, Argentina, Uruguay, and Cuba, and they accompany me as travel reading. Thanks to braille, I am no longer something that must be looked after and considered; I have become a person with my own ideas and my own will.

After a long time has gone by and successes and failures have made of me the person I am today, as similar and different as any other human being, I understand this very clearly now.

Sometimes, when I ponder on my existence, I wonder what that ophthalmologist of my childhood would think, he whose advice was that I should be condemned to ignorance and isolation just because I suffered from a disorder that would inevitably lead to blindness.

I also think that over these almost 50 years, attitudes have changed, and this is encouraging. I know that there is still much to do and that knowledge is the best tool for reaching one's ideals.

As for myself, I know that very little of what I have lived would have been possible if I had not learned braille.

Braille: New Dawn in My Darkness

Diqian Zhao
China

The letter gave me a jolt of sheer pleasure: I had been selected for enrollment in Huaian First High School, the tops in our provincial capital. The news seemed to sprout wings on its own, to fly over all of Banzha, my small hometown. Many friends and acquaintances came by to congratulate me for proving worthy of the very best high school in Huaian!

Everybody said that now I was sure to attend a fine university. My prospects for a good career and social recognition seemed assured. I was elated!

Ever since Confucius told us to study hard and left us the example of his own scholarship, academic excellence has always been a primary goal for young Chinese. Ours was the culture that invented the civil service exam, where even in antiquity, results were graded anonymously to ensure that merit alone prevailed and whereby only the best scholars were chosen for government service. Our folk tales, our native operas are full of stories where some poor scholar gains wealth and fame for himself and his family, honour and renown for his village, through hard study and moral rectitude. Consciously or not, we in Bangzha were heirs to this tradition.

At first, none of us suspected that I had big trouble ahead: Not until I took my mandatory eye test for entrance into high school. Though I wore the strongest lenses possible because of chronically weak vision, I just could not make out any colour or number on the chart until the doctor pointed them out for me! The results of the eye exam were obvious; because of my poor vision I was found wanting for public education.

We contacted various departments in the hope that somehow I could pursue my schooling. But the answers were always the same: "I have no way to help you go to school!"

My dreams of high school, of attending an impressive university, of earning an important career were crushed. I was only 16, the age when one still believes in dreams!

In order not to despair completely, my parents and I continued to pursue our quest to find a really expert doctor – somewhere, somehow – who could effectively treat my eye condition. At the same time, I used my increasingly poor vision to study high school courses on my own. After about two years, as I began to take courses at the university level, my vision dimmed so much that at last I could no longer read books at all. Finally I was forced to accept the doctors' unanimous prognosis: "Your trouble is retinitis pigmentosa. Nobody has ever found a way to treat that illness anywhere in the world today!" It seemed that all my books, which I had always loved, had deserted me, and I had lost my chances for education and employment forever!

What was I going to do with the rest of my life?

Just when I had reached the depths of despair, an official suggested that I learn braille. It was a painful experience to shift my goals from seeking a cure for my eyes to accepting permanent blindness. Yet I began to study Chinese braille adapted to our Pinyin system under the guidance of an instructor.

Though Chinese braille was entirely new to me, I did not feel that its mastery was too difficult, because I had already studied Chinese at school. After only about three months of study, I could read whole books in Chinese braille. From the School for Blind Children in Shanghai, I borrowed materials on the specific braille symbols for math, physics, and chemistry.

And so through the medium of braille, my beloved books began slowly to come back into my life. There were not as many of them as before, and they came in much bulkier and more numerous volumes. But I was very glad to have them back under any conditions whatever.

Things were turning out just as that official had predicted: Braille not only held out the prospect of continuing my education but also the chance to gain employment. In 1988 I successfully passed an important examination, my first in braille, and was admitted to a school for the blind for massage medicine in Luoyang City.

With my experience of the past few years, I could never have believed that I would walk into a classroom again. Yet in reality here I was!

There were more than 20 of us in my class and most, like myself, used braille. But there were several print users as well. Both groups had to master the same course materials. All our desks appeared a bit larger than normal, apparently to accommodate the bulk of our braille books. I found that both groups achieved about the same grade level, though reading braille was slower than reading print.

But braille in its turn also offered certain advantages. What happened one night was a good illustration.

We were slated for final exams the day after tomorrow. So just as soon as we had finished supper, everybody came back into the classroom as a kind of grand study hall to cram for our finals. Then about 8 p.m., just as we were intensely involved in reviewing, the lights all went out, and the room was plunged instantly into pitch blackness.

"Hey, the electricity went off!" Several of us cried out the obvious. "How can they lose power just when we need it for reviewing for finals!"

"What are we going to do now!"

"Say!" A light had suddenly flashed inside my mind. "Let's all study together! Those of us who read braille can cover the questions, and we'll share the information. That's the best way to review in the dark!"

"Good idea!" several agreed.

So we began with questions on anatomy. In our zest to study, we seemed to forget about the dark and to lose all track of time.

At last when we had covered the main points in anatomy, someone remarked, "Hey, this braille is really something! It's saved us from a lot of lost time in the dark!"

In this fashion we held up the tradition of Chinese students helping each other both in our studies and in our lives. After three years of study and training in medical massage, we passed our qualifying exams and earned our certificates, braille and print users together.

Before mastering braille, I had never imagined becoming a doctor of medical massage like my good friend and old classmate from middle school days, Dr. Chen. But after graduating from the Luoyang school, I established a small massage clinic near the centre of Huaian City in 1993. Here, too, braille has proved an essential tool for keeping my patients' files.

Another important avenue that braille has opened for me is the opportunity to continue my study of English, the lingua franca of our time. While still at massage school, I heard that the Hadley Distance Education School for the Blind in the US had opened an overseas branch in Fuzhou, China. I enrolled in classes in 1992 and so far I have completed nine courses in English in my spare time. I've gained a lot from my English studies, and this has impressed some of my friends, including Dr. Chen.

One Sunday morning, he paid me a visit. Dr. Chen and I had seen each other only a few times since leaving middle school. As we were old classmates and had gone into the same field, we had a lot of things to talk over. In a short time, my large bookcase caught his attention.

"You have so many books! These are about medicine, these about science. And what is this? A Chinese-English dictionary! Do you still study English?"

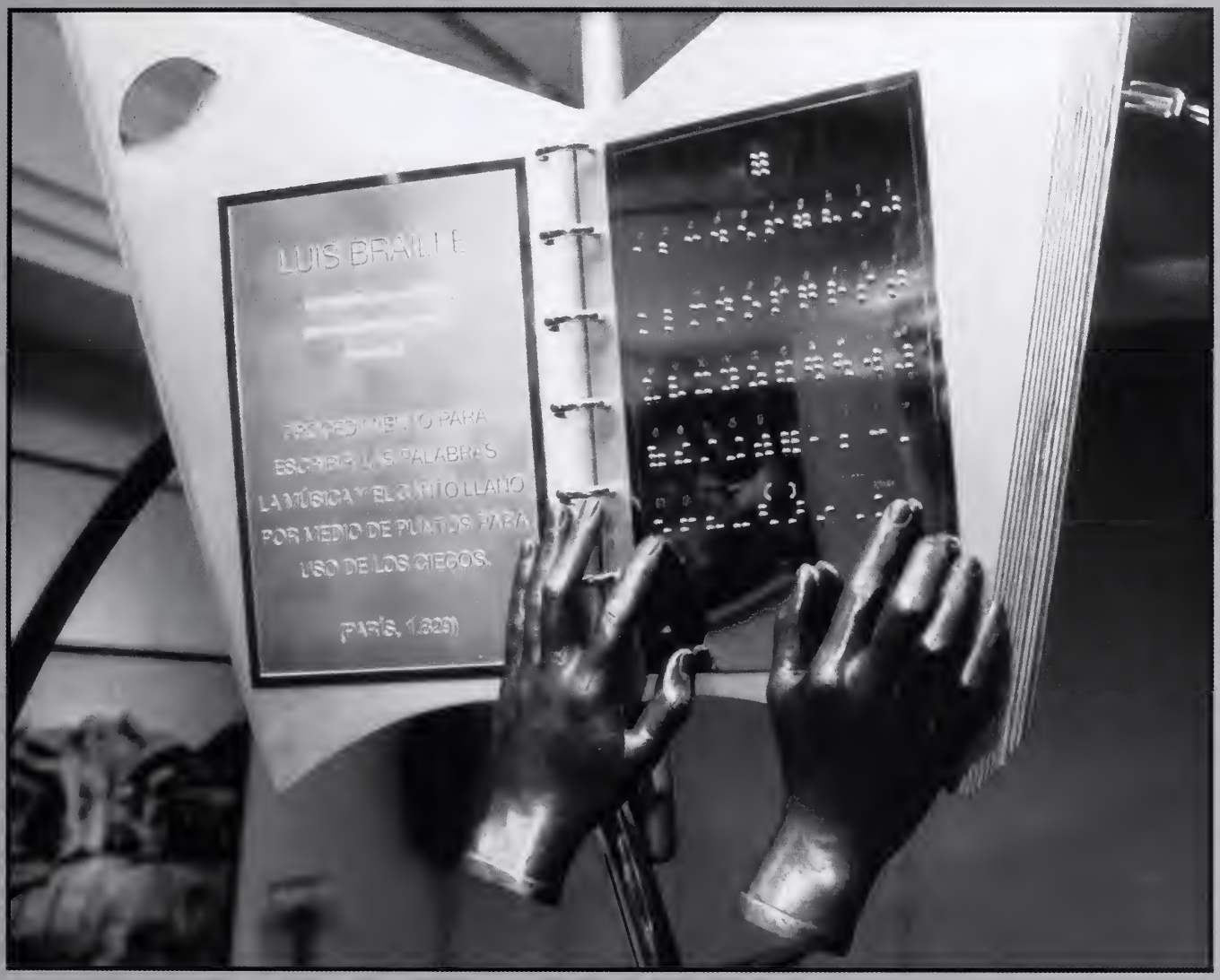
I told him about the courses I had taken from Hadley. He seemed very pleased, then suddenly thought of something. He drew a book out of his bag and opened it to find an article in English. It seemed that he wanted my help to translate certain passages in the article into Chinese.

I took out my braille equipment to write down the words as Dr. Chen read them out by spelling the English letters. Most of the words were familiar to me, but several terms were new, and I needed to look them up in my dictionary.

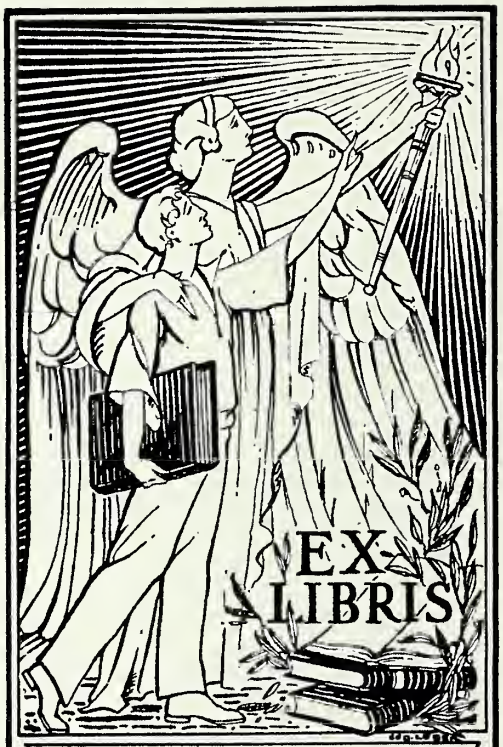
After we had finished, Dr. Chen said in amazement, "I never would have thought that your English could be so good, since you didn't even go on to high school. Braille is really great! It's become your path to success. And here's a letter in English. Do you correspond with a foreign friend?"

"Yes," I said. "That letter is from America."

"America! That distant country across the ocean!" Then he mused, "You know, I guess that braille is really leading you out into the whole wide world!"



Cesar Delgado, sculptor
Museum for the Blind, Madrid
(Photo courtesy of Pedro Zurita,
Organizacion Nacional de Ciegos)



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